DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 370 SO 020 575

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TITLE A Feminist Redefinition of Leadership.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Females; Leaders; *Leadership; Role Conflict; Role Perception; *Role Theory; Sex Bias; Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Women bring to the leadership process not only distinct needs, but also a unique perspective that should be incorporated in all facets of leadership definition. A woman who occupies a position of leadership is enacting both a sex role and an organizational role. Because of this dual role, women are vulnerable to role conflict. One kind of role conflict exists when the female leader's co-workers have conflicting expectations of how a woman should behave and how a leader should behave. This conflict will be communicated to the leader, creating a lack of clarity as to how she is expected to behave in her leadership position. Another kind of role conflict that is peculiar to women leaders is the conflict arising from attitudes held by the leader herself. When a woman in a position of leadership has one set of expectations for herself as a woman and another conflicting set of expectations for herself as a leader, then she experiences conflict. Attitudes of followers have been an important influence in determining appropriate leadership behavior and style, and leader-follower relationships are more complex when mixed sex typing is involved. The standard against which effective leadership frequently is evaluated is one that has been developed for and by men. It is crucial that the validity of leadership theory be based on work that assesses female leaders. A 26-item bibliography is included. (JB)

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"A Feminist Redefinition of Leadership"

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1989

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Abstract

The paper will address some of the conceptual underpinnings for understanding the complexity of the leadership role from a feminist perspective. This approach is predicated on the notion that certain leadership positions are not appropriate and are maintained through undue use of coercive power effected by externally conferred status. What emerges from this analysis of leadership is not only a cogent rationale for a feminist redefinition of leadership but also a call for a feminist standard integral to all leadership models. In summation, the goal of the paper is to point out that women bring to leadership models not only distinct needs but also a unique perspective that should be incorporated in all facets of leadership definition.

Leadership Theories

Leadership has been studied since ancient times, but only recently have these studies included women, or looked at sex differences. The "great man" theory of leadership was one of the earliest. According to this theory, leaders were born into their role. Research focused on attempts to define the qualities or personality traits which were part of a leader's inheritance, distinguishing him from others (Stogdill, 1974). As the name of the theory indicates, one of these traits was being a man.

Another of the earlier theories was the situational or environmental theory. According to this theory, leadership arose to meet the demands of the situation. The person who performed the leadership role was considered to be a mere instrument through which the needs of the situation were met. This theory ignored all qualities of the individuals in the leadership role, including gender.

Both of these one-sided theories, the traits theory and the situational theory, were proven through research to be inadequate (Mann, 1959). More comprehensive theories developed which conceived of leadership as a product of the individual leader interacting with the environment. Fiedler's Contingency Theory and Homans' Exchange Theory are examples of interactive models of leadership.

As the interactive models of leadership developed, many of the major research studies still were conducted with all male samples and no awareness of sex effects. The classic Ohio State Leadership Studies, for example, used samples of Air Force flight crews, school superintendents, foremen in manufacturing plants, and ROTC cadets (Stogdill and Coons, 1957). As late as 1974, Ralph Stogdill's comprehensive Handbook of Leadership: Theory and Research omits any reference to women or sex role in its index or contents.

Another source of the male bias in the conception of leadership comes from the development of management science which followed the growth of modern industry in the early part of the twentieth century. The major proponent of the new science was Frederick Winslow Taylor. He emphasized the need for rationality, logical thought, and objectivity as managerial traits. These traits, of course, are all traditionally male (Kanter, 1977). As Kanter notes, "Early management theory thus developed rationality as the central ideal of the organization and the special province of managers."

Max Weber identifies this type of authority as rational-legal. Unlike traditional authority (relatively unlimited power conferred by birthright or a higher authority) or charismatic authority (intense personal power), rational-legal authority is vested in the organizational lines of command and

the associated legitimate power of the title or office. Middle managers exemplify this type of rational-legal authority. Given the role legitimation of middle managers and the ascribed "masculine" traits for that role, women encounter conflicting expectations.

Role Conflict

Role conflict poses particular difficulties for female leaders. In the language of role theory, a woman who occupies a position of leadership is enacting both a sex role, woman, and an organizational role, leader. The former role is differentiated from the other by an act of birth, and the latter is differentiated by the set of behaviors which are expected of the person occupying such a position (Thomas and Biddle, 1966).

Because of this dual role, women are vulnerable to role conflict. One kind of role conflict exists when the female leader's co-workers (subordinates, peers, superiors) have conflicting expectations of how a woman should behave and how a leader should behave. This conflict will be communicated to the leader, creating a lack of clarity as to how she is expected to behave in her leadership position (Katz and Kahn, 1966).

People generally expect the leader to be a man (Inderlied and Powell, 1979), and when research subjects choose the future leader of a group, men were more likely than women to select themselves (Eskilson and Wiley, 1976). In business, when respondents were asked to give three separate ratings of successful middle managers, the ratings for men and middle managers overlapped for 60 of 86 items. In contrast, evaluations of women in general showed them to be similar to successful middle managers on only 8 of 86 items (Massengill and DiMarco, 1979).

Another kind of role conflict which is peculiar to women leaders is the conflict arising from attitudes held by the leader herself. When a woman in a position of leadership has one set of expectations for herself as a woman and another conflicting set of expectations for herself as a leader, then she experiences conflict.

In the literature review of attitudinal barriers to women entering managerial positions, O'Leary (1974) finds such conflict. Studies are cited which indicate that even while performing leadership roles calling for self-confidence and high achievement, the women in these roles hold attitudes towards themselves as women which include low self-esteem, fear of failure, and expectations of negative consequences of engaging in achievement oriented behavior.

Another way in which women are theoretically vulnerable, according to the role theory conception of leadership, is in the achievement of "role legitimation." Role theory provides this term to describe the fact that however a leader acquires his/her position, the power and authority of the position must be recognized by followers, peers, and superiors. Although different leader behaviors lead to legitimation in different circumstances, a generalization is that "the extent to which the leader is able to fulfill these expectations [of followers, peers, superiors] tends to determine the degree to which groups concerned will legitimate the leadership role" (Stogdill, 1974).

Leadership as a Transactional Process

Attitudes of followers have been an important influence in determining appropriate leadership behavior and style. In the foreseeable future, the emergence of women into less traditional roles questions the salience of sex-role attitudes in the leadership process. Ultimately, the response of subordinates to the leader determines how effective the leader will be. Therefore, follower compliance to leaders in non-traditional roles adds this new dimension to the leadership process (Rice, Benders, and Vitters, 1980).

Situational favorableness (amount of control and influence the leader has over the group) demonstrates that leader-follower relationships are more complex when mixed sex typing is involved. In the changing society of the 1980's and 1990's, however, sex typing of the groups will be mixed increasingly. It will not be uncommon to see many more female leaders as well as a more balanced mix of male-female followers. Initially, designated female leaders may not readily enjoy the compliance of followers the way male leaders do. However, proven leaders, be they male or female, enjoy the support of followers even to the point of overshadowing stereotypic beliefs and attitudes about women in leadership (Butterfield and Powell, 1981).

Defining Leadership Effectiveness

Expectations about leadership incorporate many masculine and few feminine traits (Massengill and DiMarco, 1979). Because of this, the standard against which effective leadership frequently is evaluated is one which has been developed for and by men. This research suggests that standards of evaluation of effective leadership often are biased against women by virtue of their sex and gender-trait expectations that accompany it. These standards of

effectiveness need to be evaluated and, where necessary, improved to remove discriminatory biases against women. This requires that women not be regarded as liabilities but rather as resources that can be encouraged to extend and better current criteria for judging good leadership (Friedan, 1981).

Myths and Realities

In looking at leadership models from a feminist perspective, it is necessary to ask questions and ultimately redefine certain assumptions. How can leadership models be adopted to respond to women's needs? How can leadership roles be effective for women's growth? How is the leadership experience of women unique and what implications does this have for future leadership research?

Myth: Women have equal access to leadership roles.

Reality: Social conditioning inundates women with the insistent message that she is out of place. A woman often misses the external prompting and support for leadership roles.

Myth: A feminist leader is in the perfect place to eradicate any inequalities based on gender.

Reality: The fallacy of this aspiration lies in the fact that a leader is unable to revise prevailing social conditioning and can only encourage and support a feminist philosophy of egalitarianism.

Myth: Women have female role models available to them in leadership roles.

Reality: Where are the women? It is not that no role models exist; women have been active in leadership roles throughout history, yet their story is unspoken or hidden.

Myth: The "superwoman" is a model of leadership.

Reality: The "superwoman" represents over-competence in a struggle to gain parity in a male dominated realm. With attention to the tenets of a feminist vision of leadership, the "superwoman" has no impetus to come into being.

Implications for Women

As indicated in previous discussion, it is often inappropriate to transfer theory and practice based on male-dominated research directly to female leaders. It is crucial that the validity of leadership theory be based upon work which assesses female leaders. An implication of Carol Gilligan's book, In a Different Voice, lies in the direct application of the female voice to the leadership function. Gilligan is not arguing for an exclusion of the male voice; rather, she wants the female concern for relationships included, not as a deviant, but as an equal partner.

Robert F. Bales' research further elucidates Gilligan's observation. Using a group setting in which to observe emerging leaders, Bales noted that two types of leaders were present; the instrumental leader who focused on task completion and group productivity, and the expressive leader, who focused on group feelings and interactions of a personal nature. It may be gleaned from these observations that a synthesis of these two alternatives would provide a more effective and suitable leader model. The ideal leaders may be men and women who combine instrumentality--a measure of the ability to manipulate the environment to acheive goals, which

is traditionally associated with "masculine" men--and expressivity--a measure of emotional warmth and sensitivity to others which has always been considered a more feminine trait (Munson, 1980).

Conclusion

The goal of this discussion has been to point out that women bring to the leadership process not only distinct needs but also a unique perspective that would be beneficial if incorporated in all facets of leadership development. Labeling myths that impede our realization of leadership differences is the first step in insuring a more positive experience for women. Enlightened leadership models for women must strive to follow the tenets of John Dewey who cautioned against transferring a body of knowledge from one generation to the next "especially if that body of knowledge is skewed and inappropriate to a woman's view" (Dewey, 1938). When Dewey urged leadership educators to learn new role borders to recodify ingrained habits and to question old ideas, he was transforming the approach to leadership.

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